

FAITH VS. FEAR

a faith response to gun violence

A 5-Part Bible Study

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God is still speaking,
**UNITED CHURCH
OF CHRIST**



Gun Violence by the Numbers

- Each year over 30,000 Americans are killed by guns. *(Center for Disease Control and Prevention)*
 - More U.S. citizens have died in the last 50 years by guns in our homes, streets and schools than have died in the history of all U.S. wars. *(Congressional Research Service and CDC/National Center for Health Statistics)*
- Firearms are the second leading cause of death (after motor vehicle accidents) for young people age 19 and under in the U.S. *(CDC National Center for Injury Prevention and Control)*
- 8 American children and teens age 19 and under are killed by guns every day. *(CDC National Center for Injury Prevention and Control)*
 - A child/teen is killed or injured by a gun every 30 minutes *(Children's Defense Fund)*
 - Newtown Happens Every Week in America. More children die every 3 days in America by a gun than died in the December 14, 2012 Newtown massacre. *(Children's Defense Fund)*
- Nearly two-thirds of all gun deaths are suicides. *(Center for Disease Control and Prevention)*
 - More guns = more suicides. People in states with many guns have elevated rates of suicide, particularly firearm suicide. *(Harvard School of Public Health Study)*
- For each time a gun in the home was used for a protective shooting, there were:
 - 4 unintentional shootings
 - 7 criminal assaults or homicides
 - 11 suicides *(Journal of Trauma, 1998)*
- 60% of those who own a gun give personal safety/protection as top reason for ownership. *(2013 Gallup Poll)*
- Gun violence costs the U.S. \$229 billion annually. *(Mother Jones and Pacific Institute for Research and Evaluation)*
- There are more than 300 million guns in civilian hands in the United States today. *(Congressional Research Service)*

Part One: Love One Another

Scripture

John 13:34-35

Jesus said, "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; Even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

Reflection

The evening before Jesus was crucified, he met with his disciples and gave them a new commandment: *love one another*. Then he shared the bread and cup with them; then he washed their feet. It was not a time to tell a parable, or perform a miracle, or relive old glories, or admonish them for their lack of understanding, or instruct them in how to carry on after his death. No, it was a time to love – to speak about love, to act in love, to embody love.

Violence is the antithesis of Jesus' new commandment. Gun violence destroys, and its destruction has far-reaching effects – physical, psychological, social, communal, emotional, and yes, spiritual.

Difficult as it may be to resist the way of the gun, we are called to follow the way of Jesus: *love one another*.

Questions for Discussion

Listen to the comments and stories of others without judgment, to the best of your ability.

1. Has gun violence directly touched your life? If so, how, when, where, and whom?
2. Did you grow up in a family that had one or more guns? If so, what did you learn about the use of guns? How have your own values about guns and gun violence changed or stayed the same?
3. How does your own Christian faith – your journey of discipleship – speak to the issue of gun violence and its prevention?
4. When considering this issue, when do you feel most hopeful? When do you feel despair?

Prayer

Lord, make me an instrument of thy peace.
Where there is hatred, let me sow love;
Where there is injury, pardon;
Where there is doubt, faith;

Where there is despair, hope;
Where there is darkness, light;
Where there is sadness, joy.

O divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek
To be consoled as to console,
To be understood as to understand,
To be loved as to love;
For it is in giving that we receive;
It is in pardoning that we are pardoned;
It is in dying to self that we are born to eternal life.

Saint Francis of Assisi (1182-1226 C.E.)

Contributer
Victoria Wilgocki

Part Two: Put Away Your Sword

Scripture

Matthew 26:51-52

Suddenly, one of those with Jesus put his hand on his sword, drew it, and struck the slave of the high priest, cutting off his ear. Then Jesus said to him, "Put your sword back into its place; for all who take the sword will perish by the sword."

Reflection

I have often tried to imagine the scene of Jesus' arrest. The Gospel tells us it was late at night, after the Last Supper, presumably a long meal at which wine was consumed. It was dark when soldiers descended on the sleepy disciples. Were they carrying torches, or did they make a more stealthy approach? However they arrived, their sudden presence escalated the emotion from zero to one hundred in a matter of seconds, until, according to Matthew, one of those with Jesus drew a sword and slashed out, wounding a slave of the high priest. Clearly, the moment was chaotic. I've wondered if Jesus shouted, "Stop!" before ordering his defender to put away his sword.

We have learned, painfully, that gun violence most often erupts out of chaos, when emotions have escalated from zero to one hundred in a matter of seconds. This is true in domestic violence situations. It is true on street corners late at night. It is true when violence emerges from road rage. Jesus' command to put away our weapons is rarely, if ever, heeded. But even if it could be heard and obeyed, the difference between a slash with a sword and a bullet fired is lethality, and lethality makes all the difference.

We are a nation awash in guns, firearms that have far exceeded swords, clubs, and hunting tools in their speed, lethality, and proliferation. We are living in the constant chaos of rage and the frequent eruption of violence. Now, instead of heeding Jesus' command to stop in any one particular situation, we must learn to heed his command to stop as a nation caught up in the ever-rising tide of anger and vengeance. And we must obey his counsel to put our weapons back into their place, else we too will perish in gun violence.

I wonder what it will take for us to transcend the individual experience to a more community based approach. I wonder how we will ever rise above the individual entitlement to bear arms to a cultural concern for the safety of others. I wonder when we stopped heeding Jesus' command to stop! Put away your sword! I wonder when life became so expendable so that my right to carry a gun, concealed or visible, military-grade, automatic, legally purchased or obtained with no criminal background check, is more sacred than your right to live.

Yes, Jesus, I will stop. Amen.

Questions for Discussion

1. Think about times when you have felt your emotions escalate from zero to one hundred quickly. What did you do with those emotions?
2. When has violence occurred during times of chaos in your experience? What were the consequences?
3. Has gun violence impacted your neighborhood, town, city, church? Reflect on this impact and talk with one another about those impacts.

Prayer

Sustaining God, we are a people who like order, stability, and predictability. Change rattles us. Turmoil makes us feel confused and angry.

Guide us, O God, to peace in times of chaos.

We try to be loving and good, we try to take care of one another, but at times emotions rise out of fear and we hate.

Guide us, O God, to peace in times of chaos.

We know to trust in you when all is chaotic. Help us respond in non-violent ways. Help us to put away our swords.

Guide us, O God, to peace in times of chaos.

Fill us with the peace that comes through your son Jesus Christ so that we can live responsibly and fully through faith and not fear.

Guide us, O God, to peace. Amen

Contributer

Carla Bailey

Part Three: The Gun as Idol

Scripture

Exodus 20: 4-5

"You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or worship them."

Reflection

Few crimes are more harshly forbidden in the Old Testament than sacrifice to the god Moloch (see Leviticus 18.21, 20.1-5). The sacrifice referred to was of living children consumed in the fires of offering to Moloch. Ever since then, worship of Moloch has been the sign of a deeply degraded culture. Ancient Romans justified the destruction of Carthage by noting that children were sacrificed to Moloch there. Milton represented Moloch as the first pagan god who joined Satan's war on humankind:

*First Moloch, horrid king, besmear'd with blood
Of human sacrifice, and parents' tears,
Though for the noise of Drums and Timbrels loud
Their children's cries unheard, that pass'd through fire
To his grim idol. (Paradise Lost 1.392-96)*

Read again those lines, with recent images seared into our brains—"besmeared with blood" and "parents' tears." They give the real meaning of what happened at Sandy Hook Elementary School. That horror cannot be blamed just on one unhinged person. It was the sacrifice we as a culture made, and continually make, to our demonic god. We guarantee that people will continue to have a flood of killing power readily supplied him. We have to make that offering, out of devotion to our Moloch, our god. The gun is our Moloch. We sacrifice children to him daily—sometimes, as at Sandy Hook, by directly throwing them into the fire hose of bullets from our protected private killing machines, sometimes by blighting our children's lives by the death of a parent, a schoolmate, a teacher, a protector. Sometimes this is done by mass killings sometimes by private offerings to the god.

The gun is not a mere tool, a bit of technology, a political issue, a point of debate. It is an object of reverence. Devotion to it precludes interruption with the sacrifices it entails. Like most gods, it does what it will, and cannot be questioned. Its acolytes think it is capable only of good things. It guarantees life and safety and freedom. It even guarantees law. Law grows from it. Then how can law question it?

Its power to do good is matched by its incapacity to do anything wrong. It cannot kill. Thwarting the god is what kills. If it seems to kill, that is only because the god's bottomless appetite for death has not been adequately fed. The answer to problems caused by guns is more guns, millions of guns, guns everywhere, carried openly, carried secretly, in bars, in churches, in offices, in government buildings. Only the lack of guns can be a curse, not their beneficent omnipresence.

Adoration of Moloch permeates the country, imposing a hushed silence as he works his will. One cannot question his rites, even as the blood is gushing through the idol's teeth. The White House spokesman invokes the silence of tradition in religious ceremony. "It is not the time" to question Moloch. No time is right for showing disrespect for Moloch.

Adapted from "Our Moloch" New York Review of Books Dec. 15, 2012 by Gary Willis

Questions for Discussion

1. Given that idolatry is generally defined as 1) blind or excessive devotion to something or 2) giving authority or power to something that promises more than it can deliver - have we, as a society, become idol worshippers of guns?
2. As Christians and Americans, how do we understand the connections and challenges that intersect when the Second Commandment meets the Second Amendment? What are the ways our country, our communities, ourselves are obsessed with self-liberation and self-preservation?

Second Commandment:

"You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth." Exodus 20:4-5a

Second Amendment:

"A well regulated militia being necessary to the security of a free state, the right of the people to keep and bear arms shall not be infringed."

Prayer

O God, open our eyes to our hidden idolatry. Show us what we have placed before you in our lives. We confess that we have allowed guilt, shame, pain, and loneliness to make us ache. We have allowed anger, hatred, and fear to make us violent.

Remind us that our idols will not save us from those feelings. Remind us that you alone can save us. Your Spirit guides us in times of weakness. When we hurt, we turn to you for healing. When we anger, we turn to you for peace. When we suffer, we turn to you for relief. When we question, we turn to you for clarity. Keep us from distractions and temptations. Bless us in our task to keep you above all else.

In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

Contributor

Matthew Crebbin

Part Four: Swords Into Ploughshares

Scripture

Micah 4:1-4

In days to come
the mountain of GOD's house
shall be established as the highest of the mountains,
and shall be raised up above the hills.
Peoples shall stream to it,
and many nations shall come and say:
'Come, let us go up to the mountain of GOD,
to the house of the GOD of Jacob;
that he may teach us his ways
and that we may walk in his paths.'
For out of Zion shall go forth instruction,
and the word of GOD from Jerusalem.
He shall judge between many peoples,
and shall arbitrate between strong nations far away;
they shall beat their swords into ploughshares,
and their spears into pruning-hooks;
nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
neither shall they learn war any more;
but they shall all sit under their own vines and under their own fig trees,
and no one shall make them afraid;
for the mouth of the GOD of hosts has spoken.

Reflection

Imagine writing a poem like this one from Micah that lays out the whole future of the world on the lips of the poet:

In the days to come . . .!

The poem pushes us who listen into the future.

The poem is an act of imagination that invites us to think beyond the present, knowing that things will not stay as they are;

The poem is an act of hope that portrays the future quite unlike the present, and treats the future as though it is as certain as the present;

The poem is an act of assurance, that God will not stop until the world has been healed and brought to its senses;

The poem is an act of summons, whereby the future is not only a gift from God but is a task for the faithful to undertake.

This poem was so crucial to the Old Testament community, because they were mired in an unbearable present tense, living under the grinding reality of one empire after another. In our time, moreover, our culture is so taken up in immediate crises of the economy and the military that there is no one left to think about God's future . . . unless it is the church.

There are days to come because God is Lord and therefore we must take care not to absolutize the present tense, not to freeze the moment of our fear or our triumph or our loss or our gain. The present tense is not guaranteed into the future, for God's future will endlessly put our present tense at risk.

The image of the poem is one of all the nations who will come to Jerusalem, that great city of peace. Imagine saying that about Jerusalem when the city is currently a pivot point for hatred and conflict and violence. In the days to come, Jerusalem will be Torah teacher of us all; all nations will be willing to be instructed on how to organize the future differently according to the purposes of God.

The key element in this instruction from Jerusalem for a viable future is that there will be serious disarmament:

"They shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks;
nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more."
(Micah 4:3)

The image is of people willingly dismantling their weapons, not only dismantling but transforming them into useful tools of agricultural productivity. The abandonment of weapons is not forced, but is done willingly. And if done willingly, the poem surely suggests that in time to come there will be enough of trust, effective communication, and solidarity that old enemies can be a new community together.

Thus the key mark of God's future is disarmament, the transformation of the economy from a war footing to an economy of food production. Such disarmament means, every time, the capacity to yield one's fear and aggressiveness and ambition and anxiety to a larger assurance, a guarantee that we need not position ourselves for hostility because our hostility is contained in the larger intention of God for peace, justice, and well-being.

Walter Brueggemann (2011-09-16). The Collected Sermons of Walter Brueggemann

Questions for Discussion

1. Micah imagined a world where each person would "sit under their own vines and under their own fig trees, and no one shall make them afraid." What would your own vision of peace and safety look like today, particularly with regard to guns in our communities? What might make others feel safe enough to give up their weapons?

2. There are a number of public policies for reducing gun violence. Which of the ideas from the list below most connect to you? To your community?

- universal background checks
- handgun-purchaser licensing
- insurance requirements for all gun owners
- strengthening safe storage laws
- repealing Stand Your Ground laws
- addressing issues of mental illness and social isolation
- reducing suicide

Prayer

Dear Jesus, we dream of a world where we learn war no more. A world free of poverty and oppression, free of anger and hate; a world free of weapons and killing. We desperately pray for peace. But we are afraid. Help us remember that you turned over the tables of moneychangers, you prayed for those who killed you, you gave your life so that we may live. Give us compassion, give us patience, give us understanding. Give us the courage to stand up for what we believe. Give us the strength to protect our children.

When we feel we have given all we can to bring peace to this world, help us to remember your sacrifice and give us the faith to continue to serve you and our neighbors. Transform our fear, aggressiveness, ambition, and anxiety to faith, assurance, justice, and your overwhelming intention of peace.

May we turn away from the sword and spear, the ways of war. By your grace, may we learn a new way toward peace. By your grace, may we turn tools intended to harm into tools that support life.

Amen.

Contributor

Matthew Crebbin

Part Five: All Who Take the Sword

Scripture

Matthew 26: 50-52

Then they came and laid hands on Jesus and arrested him. Suddenly, one of those with Jesus put his hand on his sword, drew it, and struck the slave of the high priest, cutting off his ear. Then Jesus said to him, "Put your sword back into its place; for all who take the sword will perish by the sword."

Reflection

"The ultimate weakness of violence is that it is a descending spiral, begetting the very thing it seeks to destroy. Instead of diminishing evil, it multiplies it. Through violence you may murder the liar, but you cannot murder the lie, nor establish the truth. Through violence you may murder the hater, but you do not murder hate. In fact, violence merely increases hate. So it goes. Returning violence for violence multiplies violence, adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars. Darkness cannot drive out darkness: only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate: only love can do that."

Martin Luther King, Jr. From "Where Do We Go From Here?"
as published in *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?* (1967), p. 62.

Questions for Discussion

1. Jesus suggested that violence begets violence and that the realm that he was inaugurating did not depend upon violence and would not use violence to achieve either short term or long term goals. What are our responsibilities as Christ's followers to not only live non-violently but to also reduce violence that affects those around us? How might we do this in response to gun violence - especially when others may be fearful or anxious and wish to insure that they can protect themselves and those they love from harm?
2. How do we respond to Martin Luther King's reminder that violence and hate are often linked? Have we become numb to violence around us?
3. Do you know what local groups are working on such issues?. Can you get more information for yourself and your congregation? Are there people in your congregation who wish to team up and join in this ministry of advocacy and awareness?

Prayer

Ever-living God,
splendor of true light, and never-ending day,
let your radiance clear from our minds,
the darkness of hate.

Shine in our hearts,
bring us to the light of your truth.
As daylight fills the sky,
fill us with your holy light.

May our lives be a mirror of love,
our love for you,
our love for one another,
our love for ourselves.

For we admit,
hatred creates more hate,
violence creates more violence.

But through you, we know,
love creates more love,
light creates more light.

Creator God,
you gave light to the world,
on the day you created earth,
on the day you gave your son.

May we carry the light,
may we carry the love,
in your name, we pray,

Amen.

Contributor

Matthew Crebbin

Litanies

"Oracle"

by Victoria Wilgocki

Of what are you so afraid?
Against whom do you lock your deadbolts,
set your car alarms,
wire your windows and gates?
From whom do you avert your eyes?

All: Answer, O people!

When you bought the gun
(most precious metal)
whom did you envision at the end of the barrel?

All: Answer, O people!

Hear, O people, the fear of your replies!
Examine your history,
unclench your body,
excise your malignant suspicions,
suck out the poison of your privilege.

All: Answer, O people!

For I tell you:
If you return to me,
if you remove the headline news from your eyes,
and do not waver,
if you swear

'I trust in God; I trust that all are made in God's image;
I shall not fear that which is not worthy of fear,'

then the windows will be flung wide, and
the gates will move on their too tight hinges,
then the yearning for forgiveness and mercy can be pruned,
then the way of compassion and justice can flower.

Shalom awaits!

All: Shalom awaits!

Remembering Those We Have Lost **by Matthew Crebbin**

- Voice 1: We gather today with shattered hearts - hearts broken open by sorrow which sometimes seems too unbearable. We know far too well the trauma and grief of losing a loved one to gun violence. We come to this place to raise our voice for the flesh and blood victims who are so near and dear to us.
- Voice 2: We are mothers and fathers, sisters and brothers, friends and neighbors who have had the knock at the door in the middle of the night, or the phone call in the early morning hours. We have sat in the hospital waiting room or at the firehouse or stood on the street corner - when word came to us that our beloved one had been taken from us by a gun.
- Voice 3: For us gun violence is not some distant issue that is debated on cable news. Gun violence is a reality that has altered our families forever. It has taken our cherished child. It has denied us a mother. It has separated us from the love of our life. It has left a hole in our heart too deep to fill.
- Voice 4: Although we find ourselves in a broken world - a world in which hurting people far too often hurt other people, we come longing for healing. We gather to pray for peace. Not only that, but we also come pledging to reverse the conditions that have produced such violence and destructive behavior that have torn at the fabric of our families and our communities.
- Voice 5: Gun violence affects all of us. Our communities may be diverse but the grief and pain are the same. The agony felt by a mother in Aurora is the same as the agony felt by a father in Chicago. Tears which fall for a son in Oak Creek are the same tears that fall for a daughter in Oakland. The precious gift of life lost in Tucson is as precious as any life lost in Washington, D.C. The children we have buried in Detroit are as beloved as those we have buried in Newtown.
- Voice 5: ...With all who remember and mourn this day, we cry out:**
- The Gathered Congregation: Today we stand together to express our unity and our commitment. We stand as one people against this violence that has touched every corner of every state in our Union. And we commit ourselves to journey on the path towards a more perfect peace - peace in all of our homes, our towns and our cities. To a place where the sound of gunfire is stilled and the laughter of children fills the air.**

Remembering All Who Have Been Affected by Gun Violence by Matthew Crebbin

- Voice 1: We gather this day to remember. We come to remember people throughout the fifty states of our union who have been affected by gun violence. Communities large and small, urban and rural have been broken and battered by gun violence. In Newtown and New York, Isle Vista and Atlanta, Oak Creek and Oakland, Willington and Washington, Blacksburg and Birmingham, Miami and Marysville, Chicago and Cypress, Fort Hood and Fort Wayne, Tucson and Tallahassee tears have been shed and communities have been shattered.
- Voice 2: We gather to mourn the more than 30,000 Americans who die by guns each year in the United States - an average of eighty people killed by guns every day - including eight children. An American child is twelve times more likely to die by a gun than are the children who live in all of the top twenty-five industrialized nations combined.
- Voice 3: Since John F. Kennedy was assassinated in 1963, more Americans have died by guns on our streets, in our homes, at our schools and workplaces than all the American servicemen and women lost to us in all of the wars in U.S. history. Gun violence in America is estimated to cost at least \$100 billion every year. We declare this day that the cost in tears and resources is too much. We gather to remember and to weep and to declare that the time for change is now.
- Voice 4: We gather to remember and to stand in solidarity with survivors and to declare our support for those who still struggle in the face of such trauma and grief. For their sake and for ours, we commit ourselves to building each other up and to moving forward towards a more peaceful world.
- Voice 5: We come here this day to affirm that we are connected by an "inescapable network of mutuality and "tied in a single garment of destiny." It does not matter how large the city or how small the town - trauma and sorrow claim far too many of our citizens. For too long the tears of frightened children, the cries of inconsolable parents and the weariness of long suffering neighborhoods has been ignored. We declare on this day that our nation must turn from this path of fear and destruction.
- Voice 5: With all who join us - in cities and towns across this land we proclaim:**
- The Gathered Congregation: We must rid ourselves of this scourge of gun violence. From so many heartbreaks comes forth a united commitment to step down from church pulpits, up from living room sofas and out from behind work desks - to go into the streets of our cities and towns and promote a way of peace and wellbeing for all people. With compassion spun from the threads of sadness and horror, we will mend a nation tattered by gun violence and weave a new cloth of hope and peace.**

Suggested Hymns

All hymn numbers refer to the United Church of Christ New Century Hymnal.

O God, Our Help in Ages Past	25
Hope of the World	46
O God of All Your People Past	374
Help Us Accept Each Other	388
O God in Whom All Life Begins	401
I Will Trust in the Lord	416
God of Grace and God of Glory	436
Take My Life, God, Let It Be	448
Jesus, Priceless Treasure	480
Be Still, My Soul	488
Called as Partners in Christ's Service	495
Where Cross the Crowded Ways of Life	543
Out of the Depths, O God, We Call	554
For the Healing of the Nations	576
Lead Us from Death to Life	581
Spirit of Jesus, If I Love My Neighbor	590
Now Is the Time Approaching	609

Contributor Bios

Part One

Victoria Wilgocki is the pastor at St. Anthony Park United Church of Christ in St. Paul, Minnesota. She actively supports organizations committed to gun violence prevention and believes that real change for the good is possible.

Part Two

Carla Bailey is the Senior Minister of Plymouth Congregational Church in Minneapolis, MN, where a group of dedicated parishioners are working with Protect Minnesota to curb gun violence and introduce legislation to close the loopholes that allow for the purchase of firearms without criminal background checks. She also works with the Law Center to Prevent Gun Violence on legislative efforts to address Second Amendment issues and to bring about sane gun violence prevention.

Prior to her recent move to Minnesota, Carla served The Church of Christ at Dartmouth College as Senior Pastor, where she frequently testified in the New Hampshire legislature on gun violence prevention measures, including the effort to overturn "Stand Your Ground" laws.

Rev. Bailey is both a UCC pastor and a lawyer with standing in the Minnesota bar. She has long been active in the intersection between the law and theology, working for victims of sexual trauma, domestic violence, drug addiction and gun violence.

Parts Three, Four, and Five

Matthew Crebbin has been Senior Minister of the Newtown Congregational Church, UCC in Newtown, CT since 2007. He has served faith communities in New Hampshire, Rhode Island and Massachusetts. A sought-after preacher and lecturer, his ministry has focused upon a variety of areas including: theological dialogue, ecumenical and interfaith partnerships, grief and trauma ministry - as well as justice and peace advocacy. He currently serves as the Coordinator of the Newtown Interfaith Clergy Association.

He has served in leadership capacity on a number of local, regional and international organizations including: Rotary International, Habitat for Humanity, DoJ Newtown Victims Grant, Newtown Action Alliance and various other advocacy, health and human services organizations.

Since the events at Sandy Hook Elementary School on December 14, 2012, Rev. Crebbin has worked with a broad coalition of faith leaders in Connecticut and nationally to build bridges of understanding and compassion among diverse communities. He has been a leader in promoting peace and reconciliation near and far and has offered his voice and support to the passing of gun safety legislation and finding other means locally and nationally to reduce gun violence in all communities.